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WASHINGTON-President Fidel Castro's resignation gives the Cuban government an opportunity to reject its repressive past and chart a future course in which long-trampled freedoms and human rights are protected. Since 2004, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has kept Cuba on its Watch List of countries that require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by their governments. Today, the Commission urges the U.S. government to press Cuba through all available diplomatic channels to release all political prisoners, repeal repressive laws, and lift restrictions on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

"Cubans have waited too long for the Communist government to recognize their basic human rights, including religious freedom," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "While we have no illusions about Raul Castro's political views, the Commission sees Fidel Castro's resignation as an opportunity for Cuban officials to reform their repressive practices. Cuba's future is best assured by fully protecting, in law and practice, the fundamental freedoms of religion, expression, association and other human rights. The Commission calls on the U.S. government and its allies to send this message clearly to Cuba's new leadership."

The Cuban government abandoned its policy of atheism in the early 1990s; Castro welcomed a visit from Pope John Paul II in 1998, and two years later, religious holidays were reinstated. Those improvements did not last. A wave of arrests of democracy and free-speech advocates began in 2003, and the old tactics of restrictions and surveillance returned. The world saw once again a series of acts that demonstrated the authorities' attempts to impose inappropriate control over religious communities. A 2005 law on religion meant to "legalize" house churches has reinforced the government's efforts to increase control over some religious practice. Political prisoners and human rights and pro-democracy activists are increasingly subject to limitations on their right to practice their religion.

"Fidel Castro's nearly 50-year-long rule was marked by a stormy, and sometimes brutal, relationship with Cuba's religious communities, including arrests, deportations, and severe restrictions on religious activities. Religious life has been unjustly repressed and controlled by his government and generations of Cuban religious adherents have suffered," Cromartie said. "Today the Cuban government has the chance to fulfill its obligation to correct past wrongs and fully protect religious freedom."

The Commission has previously recommended that the U.S. government use all diplomatic means to urge the Cuban government to undertake the following measures:

- revise government Directive 43 and Resolution 46, restricting religious services in homes or other personal property, as well as other national laws and regulations on religious activities, to bring them into conformity with international standards on freedom of religion or belief;
- cease, in accordance with international standards, interference with religious activities and the internal affairs of religious communities, such as denials of visas to religious workers, limitations on freedom of movement of religious workers, infiltration and intimidation of religious communities, arbitrary prevention of religious ceremonies and processions, and attempted interference in the elections in religious bodies;
- order, publicly and officially, the state security agencies to end the instigation of mob violence against religious persons and other human rights activists, including those recently released from prison; the mistreatment of indigenous religious communities; and the harassment of the spouses of imprisoned human rights activists during religious services and hold those involved in any further incidents accountable for their conduct; and
- take immediate steps to end restrictions on religious activities protected by international treaties and covenants, which include the following measures:
 - ending the practice of arbitrarily denying registration to religious groups, as well as detaining or harassing members of religious groups and interfering with religious activities because of that unregistered status;
 - issuing permits for construction of new places of worship;

- ending the practice of evictions and requisition of personal property of religious individuals or communities without due process, restitution, or provision of alternative accommodation;
- securing the right to conduct religious education and distribute religious materials; and
- lifting restrictions on humanitarian, medical, charitable, or social service work provided by religious communities and protecting persons who conduct such activities in Cuban law.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom is an independent, bipartisan federal commission that advises the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on how to promote religious freedom and associated rights around the world. It was created by the U.S. Congress in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

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